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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 001532

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SUBJECT: BISHOPS MEET MUGABE AND TSVANGIRAI SEPARATELY IN
BID TO RESTART NEGOTIATIONS

REF: HARARE 801

Classified By: Political Officer Audu Besmer for reasons 1.5 b/d

Summary:

1. (C) Three prominent Bishops from Manicaland, all affiliated with the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), met with President Mugabe and MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai recently in an attempt to restart failed talks between the ruling and opposition parties. Mugabe raised a few issues he said were causing the impasse - mostly dealing with recognizing his legitimacy. By indirect reply, Tsvangirai said the MDC would not bring up the issue of legitimacy. Both sides have reportedly agreed to submit letters to the Bishops in the coming weeks outlining their positions. While it is too early to tell whether this mediation effort will gain traction, early signs, such as the fact that Mugabe actually agreed to meet with the Bishops, and that he brought along ZANU-PF moderates rather than hard-liners, are encouraging. End Summary.

Bishops Meet Separately with Mugabe and Tsvangirai

2. (U) On July 25, a group of prominent Zimbabwean Bishops met with President Mugabe and a few of his key advisors at State House at the request of the Bishops to discuss mediation with the MDC and resolving the country's various crises. The Bishops included the President of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) Bishop Trevor Manhanga, the President of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) Bishop Sebastian Bakare, and the President of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC) Bishop Patrick Mutume. The Secretary General of ZCC also attended as note taker. The GOZ team consisted of President Mugabe, Vice-President Joseph Msika, ZANU-PF Spokesperson Nathan Shamuyarira, Chairman of ZANU-PF John Nkomo, and Cabinet Secretary Willard Chiwewe. On July 28, the Bishops also met

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with MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai, MDC Secretary General Welshman Ncube, MDC Deputy Secretary General Gift Chimanihire and MDC Chairperson Isaac Matongo.

Manhanga Explains Bishops' Approach

3. (C) On July 28, AIDoff met with Manhanga, who has been appointed spokesperson for the group. Manhanga said the Bishops explained to Mugabe they were concerned about political polarization in the country, noting that since Zimbabwe successfully championed reconciliation in South Africa and Namibia, reconciliation could happen at home.

Mugabe's Issues

4. (C) According to Manhanga, Mugabe said the main issues in the impasse were a) his presidential legitimacy, b) the MDC's court challenge of the March 2002 presidential elections, and c) the MDC's alleged status as a puppet of the West. The Bishops responded that these issues should not stop the resumption of negotiations. Manhanga said the GOZ officials were open about the fact that sanctions were hurting them. The Bishops asked Mugabe for approval of a reinvigorated reconciliation/negotiation process, to which Mugabe responded that they (the Bishops) had a right to do this, and did not need his approval. The Bishops asked for a letter to them outlining ZANU-PF's position; Nkomo was appointed to prepare that when he returns from Tunisia on August 6.

Tsvangirai's Willingness

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5. (C) Manhanga said that the MDC had informed the Bishops that MDC planned to go ahead with its election challenge,

currently scheduled for November 3. If negotiations made good progress, however, there might not be a need to proceed with the challenge. The MDC agreed not raise the issue of legitimacy and was also agreeable to drafting a letter outlining their position, which they said would be ready for the Bishops during the week of August 4.

Next Steps

16. (C) Manhanga reported that both sides said they favored a "homegrown" process, rather than one spearheaded from outside Zimbabwe. He said when the Bishops have both letters in hand, they would announce a resumption of formal dialogue. The Bishops also plan to meet with the South African High Commissioner Jeremiah Ndou and Director-General in the South Africa Presidency, Rev. Frank Chikane, during the next two weeks. The Bishops would like South Africa to issue a public statement supporting their initiative. Manhanga said the Bishops view South Africa as a regional policeman, albeit with a weak interest in Zimbabwe. They believe that U.S. support would be critical to keep South Africa "honest".

17. (U) In a strongly worded July 23 public statement, the ZCC asked for forgiveness, saying they have prayed when in fact action was required to prevent violence, rape, intimidation, harassment, torture, and starvation of their flock. EFZ and ZCBC also issued a joint statement during the same week urging Christians to pray for a resumption of dialogue between the ruling and opposition parties.

Comment:

18. (C) There have been many false starts to negotiations over the past four years, and it is too early to predict whether this initiative will gain traction. On several occasions in the past Mugabe has agreed to talk, then backed away, walked out, or failed to follow through with the minimal steps needed to meet the opposition face to face. That the Bishops finally met with Mugabe face to face is encouraging. Even more encouraging is the fact that the other ZANU-PF officials present are from the more reasonable elements of the party -- hard-liners like Jonathan Moyo, Joseph Made, and Patrick Chinamasa, who would certainly attempt to sabotage any dialogue, were left out. For its part, the MDC has consistently indicated its willingness to negotiate, even after previous initiatives were scuttled, and again is willing to engage in this process. The issue now is whether process will ultimately give way to substance and some formula to break the current impasse. End Comment.
SULLIVAN